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Report to Parish Councils – January 2026

This report is written is for Parish Councils meeting in January.

Some of the items here are from information circulated by ESCC but which may not have been drawn to the attention of parish councillors and others.

My Activities

This section has bullet-point summaries of *some* of the meetings I have had, or actions carried out.

- I attended a meeting of full council. Core items on the agenda were budget performance to date and looking ahead to budget for next year. See below for further details
- As Team Member for Information Technology on the Fire Authority I attended the quarterly progress meeting on IT with senior staff from the Fire and Rescue Service and Telent, the prime IT contractor
- I attended a meeting of the Fire Authority. This had a short agenda, looking particularly at budgeting
- I attended a remote meeting of the Lead Member for Transport and the Environment, discussing particularly the Rail Strategy which is part of the Long-Term Transport Plan for East Sussex
- I attended a meeting of a working group of the Rother Association of Local Councils which is tasked to look at Local Government Reorganisation and the interaction with parish and town councils
- As part of budgeting for next year I attended a remote briefing on RPPR (Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources) which is the budget process we follow
- As one of three councillors on the Discretionary Transport Appeal Panel, we met to consider cases where a child, or occasionally young adult, with special needs is not granted free transport to their school. We meet roughly monthly. The substantive meeting papers and minutes are not published as these concern individuals.
- I attended remotely a meeting of cabinet, again looking at budgets!

- I attended a remote meeting of the Place Scrutiny RPPR board, again looking at budgets for areas covered by Place Scrutiny
- I attended the passing out drill and parade for 14 new recruits to the Fire and Rescue Service at the training centre in Maresfield. Each has undergone basic training for 13 weeks and as qualified firefighters will start work at various fire stations across the county. It is easy to forget that fire and rescue involves equipment but is primarily delivered by people. They will, of course, have continuing training in areas such as breathing equipment and driving.

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

As a reminder there are two linked parts to this: the Mayoral Combined County Authority covering all of Sussex and the move to unitary authorities with the abolition of the district, borough and county councils (LGR)

This situation seems to be changing rapidly so this will probably be out of date by the time you read this!

The government recently announced that the Mayoral election would be delayed by 2 years to May 2028. However, the Mayoral Combined County Authority will still be formed, as set out in a Statutory Instrument in parliament and start to put in place the procedures and organisation so that it is up and running. An interim chief executive Mark Rogers has been appointed.

The mayor will also have additional funding - £38M a year across Sussex which will be significant and help fund a range of mayoral responsibilities such as strategic transport. It is thought that some of this will be available to the combined authority even before the mayor is elected.

The consultation for Local Government Reorganisation continues as outlined in last month's report. Parish councils are able to submit their views as an organisation but parish councillors and indeed any resident can do the same as individuals.

There has been much comment about the delay in elections. Originally county council elections were due to be held in May 2025 but were delayed by the government to May 2026. However, in the original submission to government and following government guidance, councils in East Sussex proposed a two-year delay to May 2027 when elections to the new unitary council would be held. The rationale for this was twofold:

- Holding elections for county councillors who would be in power for only 2 years would waste money on elections
- Elections would cause a delay in the work being done to prepare for the new unitary authority. For a period prior to an election, sensible rules mean that political decisions cannot be taken. After an election there is a period when new councillors are brought up to speed.

Other LGRs up and down the country have often had two-year delays, though ministers only have power to delay elections by a year, the subsequent year needing parliamentary approval.

At the time of writing we do not know what the government will decide. My personal view is that the strong argument for a two-year delay is the second of the above bullets. In fact, it would make sense for both unitary and mayoral elections to be held in May 2027. I recognise that having councillors such as myself in office for 6 years rather than 4 reduces democracy, but it

does make sense from a practical organisational view and to help ensure that LGR works from the outset.

East Sussex Budgeting

As I have reported verbally at previous meetings, along with many other county and other councils, we have major challenges in budgets in the current year and also in subsequent years.

The core headline is that we have major increases in demand which cost more:

- 7.1% increase in Adult and Social care activity
- Increase in children's social care placements
- Increased numbers of Educational and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) for children with special needs, up 63% over the last 3 years
- Home to School Transport increasing by 10% in current year, linked primarily to increases in EHCP

This means that in the current year to 31st March 2026 we have a projected overspend on budget of about £24M and subsequent years look very challenging.

Expenditure needs to be balanced by income which is made up of revenue from council tax and business rates, plus various grants from central government. Nationally the government has been carrying out process they call 'Fair Funding Review' for central government grants but most aspects of this seem to be to our disadvantage, for several reasons:

- East Sussex is not deemed to be deprived even though some areas of Hastings and Bexhill are high on the list of most deprived areas
- A higher proportion of our residents are over 85 which typically require increased support from adult and social care
- National living wage is rising by 4.1% which has major impacts on the costs of adult social care

All of the above means that we are forecasting deficits of £54M for 2026/27. The table below shows this.

Medium Term Financial Plan	2026/27 £m	2027/28 £m	2028/29* £m
Council 11 February 2025 DEFICIT	25.916	18.731	0.000
Carry Forward of 2025/26 Deficit	11.449	-	-
Annual Budget Deficit after Carry Forward	37.365	18.731	0.000
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Annual Budget Deficit after updates, before new proposed savings	54.198	12.712	27.090
Cumulative Budget Deficit after updates, before new proposed savings	54.198	66.910	94.000

These deficits will need to be funded from reserves, but we do not have sufficient reserves to

fund this, as is the case in many councils.

There is a mechanism called Exceptional Financial Support (EFS). In order to be eligible for this we needed to get a CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) assessment which we have done and, as expected, it said we were a very well-run local authority with a few minor recommendations.

However, EFS is not a magic solution as deficits can be funded in two ways:

- By allowing borrowing to fund current expenditure, though this needs to be paid back in future
- By increasing council tax by more than the 5% limit which does not help our hard-pressed residents

We are continuing to look at ways of cutting expenditure, but almost all of our services are statutory in that we have to provide them. There will be much work between now and when the budget is finalised in early 2026.

Grants for Parishes

This section will occur each month and is a list of possible sources of funding for parish level projects. I have had a number of enquiries as to whether any of these could help with areas such as allotments. Sadly the answer is no – these are all intended for community/parish council projects.

- Dungeness Power Stations. I sit on the Site Stakeholder Group which liaises between the massive project to decommission these and the local community. They often provide grants for local activities including some in East Sussex even though the power stations are in Kent. For example, this Christmas Rye food bank is their designated charity. The criteria for this used to be within 15 miles of Dungeness but this has been increased to 20 miles.

Apparently the budget for this is underspent this year, so I encourage clerks to identify specific items they apply for a grant. Apparently values less than £2000 are readily approved. Contact me for details.

- Veolia Green and Food Waste Composting Facility. As a member of Place Scrutiny I have visited this site near Lewes. Their 'output' is compost and they deliver 'one tonne bags' at no cost to local community gardens and similar. I put Peasmash parish council in contact with them and they have already received two bags for the community gardens.
- Southeast Water do make grants to local communities, for example to support playgrounds
- Gatwick Airport are keen on funding local projects, at least partly driven by their desire to open a second runway which would have some impact on East Sussex, though less in the Eastern part

If you have a project which might benefit, please let me know and I will put you in contact and try to help get it approved. It seems that the best will be for those seeking funds to send me an email which I will then forward.

Please let me know if you come across any new sources of funding and I will add them to the list.